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The "import thesis" about African political thought¹

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In several serious academic studies as well as in a host of more every-day accounts of African history the view is advanced that nationalist thought in Africa derived from Enlightenment ideas and revolutionary thought that came from abroad.² Authors point out a kind of dialectic of history, where the same powers that colonised Africa also spread the basic ideas that guided the struggle for its abolition. This "import thesis", as I will call it, fits so well into the dominant background knowledge of much of the academia that it is seldom singled out for serious investigation. Interestingly, the "import thesis" also returns with authors who are highly critical of this dominant academia and claim that the troubles of Africa result from importing foreign ideas instead of building upon indigenous ones.

In this paper, I want to advance a critical analysis of this "import thesis" of African political thought. I investigate both the factual historical evidence for the thesis and the philosophical view of the nature of political ideas that it involves.

The history of anti-colonial struggles is often divided into what is called "primary resistance" and "secondary resistance". The first are the struggles of African political communities against colonial invasions and incursions. The second are movements of anti-colonial liberation that developed within the colonial context. The "import thesis" is advanced in explaining secondary resistance, and, thus, applies only to resistance after the mid-nineteenth century. Some use it to explain that the beginnings of secondary resistance developed exactly in those places where colonial presence became established first, namely in the so-called West African Settlements (Sierra Leone, Gold Coast etc.). Such import of ideas is then seen as the ideological counterpart of the transatlantic triangular trade system connecting Britain, West Africa and the Americas. It brought, as a by-product, Christian missionaries (White and Black!) and Enlightenment ideas of freedom and self-determination to Africa.

Looking in somewhat more detail at the texts and political practices of African political thinkers since 1850, the import element could be identified at a number of points. Christian Abolitionist ideas combined with Pan-Negroist ideas came to Africa from the America's

¹ This article has been submitted to *African Philosophy*.

² See, e.g., Shepperson (1960, 1961), Geis (1968), and Davidson (1992).

with influential intellectuals like Edward Wilmot Blyden and Alexander Crummell in the 1850s and '60s. The idea of establishing modern nation-states in West Africa came with the famous modernist 'recaptive' Africanus Horton in the 1860s and '70s. The idea of modern political movements, such as the Aborigines Rights Protection Society in the 1890s and the National Congress for British West Africa in the 1920s, emerged under the leadership of the so-called "educated elites" who took their education from Britain and America. The "import thesis" can easily be extended into more recent history as well. One can think of Marxist-inspired nationalism in the Nkrumah - Padmore tradition after the Second World War, African Socialism in the 1960s, so much influenced by the European idea of the Welfare State and by Humanist Christianity. Again, the introduction of African communism in the decades thereafter and the introduction of Multi-Partyism in the 1990s tend to be seen as foreign imports.

In view of this long list one may be somewhat depressed about this picture of dependency even where African independence is theorised. However, I think that a more assertive response is possible, one that challenges the factual evidence upon which this list of historical cases is based. However, such an alternative interpretation of the history of African political thought in this period requires a much more detailed and methodologically sophisticated look at each of the movements and their ideas than is usually executed. In this paper I have to limit such detailed analysis to just a few cases and even in the descriptions of these cases I cannot go into all the necessary detail. However, a much more extensive argument can be found in my *Political Discourses in African Thought; 1850 to the Present*, and in the classical study by Ayo Langley of 1973, *Pan-Africanism and nationalism in West Africa: A case study in ideology and social classes*.

Let me begin with the example of the Aborigines Rights Protection Society (ARPS), the Gold Coast movement in the 1890s that campaigned against the colonial Land Laws claiming all non-occupied land as crown land under the colonial administration. The ARPS looks at first sight like an early and classical case of western educated elites resisting the colonial administration by making use of the vocabulary of this same colonial power, for instance by claiming liberties, rights, democratic influence and self-determination. The intellectuals of this movement, such as John Mensah Sarbah and Joseph Casely Hayford, were British trained lawyers. The sociological environment in towns such as Freetown and Cape Coast included many aspects of British social life, and even the explicit political objective of the movement looks rather pro-British from our contemporary view. They did not demand liberation from colonialism, but a more enlightened colonial policy that would be based upon a better understanding of African societies and would leave much more of the internal affairs of the colony to Africans. Canada and Australia with their relative independent position within the empire were the examples of this African elite. In

sociological and historical studies the educated elite are often described as ‘brokers’ between the British and the African subjects.³

However, a serious and detailed analysis does not confirm this categorisation of the ARPS. Certainly, people like Sarbah and Hayford made use of their European training and European ideas when beneficial for the movement. I will maintain, however, that the thrust of the movement, its participants, as well as its political discourse, were not European. It would be more correct to consider the ideas of the ARPS as creative indigenous resistance in its own right.

Sociologically, the ARPS was a movement of close co-operation between traditional rulers, important business men and the educated elite. The direct objective was to resist the undermining of traditional authorities' powers over land issues as a consequence of the colonial Land Laws. Sociologically, thus, the ARPS was a purely African resistance. Intellectually, the ARPS represented a self-contained ideological orientation. Within this ideological frame, the educated elite perceived themselves to be destined for a key role in a kind of revived and modernised indigenous political system. Casely Hayford, for instance, identified in his detailed study of the Akan traditional system an elaborate division of roles and tasks between council and chief; in fact a kind of separation of powers between the legislative and the executive.⁴ The chief functions in this system as head of the executive, but the legislative has its own leaders, such as the so-called ‘linguist’. In elaborating this system in the modern context, the intellectuals argued that the role of the council and linguist would be developed further and the ‘natural’ role of the educated elite would be that of managers of the political process in the council.⁵

This strategy of elaborating a modernised indigenous system as the response to the challenge of the West in fact had already a tradition within the Gold Coast context. Hayford even explicitly referred to this historical tradition, a tradition that includes the abortive attempt to establish the Fanti Federation, in 1872 and 1873, and the earlier Mankessim Declaration, a statement by prominent persons such as kings, advisors, business men and the educated. Especially the Mankessim Declaration is remarkable. It outlines a progressive joint policy of local African leaders involving, for instance, the establishment of schools and compulsory education; something that had not even been implemented in the most ‘advanced’ countries in Europe at that time!⁶

This sketch of the sociological dynamics and the political ideas involved in the ARPS indicates that this movement was not fuelled by imported ideas, but a creative and progressive indigenous response to the challenge of increasing European domination. A movement for “modernisation from indigenous roots” one could say. The fact that, in actual history, the resistance of the type of the ARPS has not been successful does not change this

³ E.g. De Moraes Farias @ Barber (1990).

⁴ Casely Hayford (1903)

⁵ For an elaboration of such a modernised traditional system, see e.g. De Graft Johnson (1928)

⁶ Such ideas can also be found in Africanus Horton's *West African Countries and Peoples* (London, 1868)

conclusion. In fact, the whole idea of modernisation from indigenous roots became politically irrelevant with the full establishment of colonial rule in Africa in the early years of the 20th century.⁷ Intellectually, however, the ARPS intellectuals remain quite interesting. They were not so much importers of foreign ideas as creative innovators of their tradition.

My second example to disprove the import thesis about African political thought concerns post-war radical nationalism.⁸ Here again, the situation can easily be sketched as one of import. One can point at the enormous influence of Padmore on young Africans in London with his originally communist inspired and crystal clear analyses of colonialism. Furthermore, one can point at the influence of liberal ideas of freedom. One of the first points of action by Africans immediately after the war was an appeal to the principles for a free world order as were laid down in the Atlantic Charter by Roosevelt and Churchill in 1941. In a petition to the United Nations Conference in 1945, they demanded that these principles would also apply to the colonised world and thus end colonialism. Even Kwame Nkrumah, the most prominent comrades of Padmore, incorporated much this liberal inspiration (as his policies in Ghana in the 1950s express). It is said that Nkrumah, while sailing out of New York and passing the Freedom statue, vowed to bring its inspiration of freedom to Africa.

However, if we investigate in more detail the actual process of political thought and action in the first decades after the war, then, rather than import of ideas, we see the selective appropriation of various elements to serve a new African agenda. The agenda itself was not even that new. Except, probably, for the idea of Pan-Africanism, the radical anti-colonial ideas can also be found among the many youth movements which developed for instance in Nigeria in the 1940s.

In support of the import thesis one could point to the debate in Ghana in the 1950s between protagonists of a federal state and protagonists of a unitary state. Nkrumah defended an almost universalist image of the unitary nation-state as elaborated in European political thought, whereas J.B. Danquah, as the eloquent defender of federal state form for Ghana, was clearly much more in touch with the specific history, plurality and the traditional leadership in the country. However, the reasons for Nkrumah to hold on to this unitary idea of the state were probably quite local. First of all to foster a strong unitary

⁷ In fact the quite common negative judgement of the educated elite is quite unfair when it concern the ARPS intellectuals. They worked jointly with other with the traditional leaders. It was the colonial government that sharpened the divisions between the educated and the chiefs by increasingly side-lining and ridiculing the former (with terms like “trousered niggers” etc.) and incorporating the latter in their own system of indirect rule.

⁸ One should note here the major difference of this colonial resistance to that of the ARPS, when, before the full establishment of colonial rule, the hope could still be held that colonisation could be avoided or softened into a situation similar to Canada or Australia, where a large degree of self-rule could be established. For people like Nkrumah and Azikiwe, the liberation issue was no longer framed in terms of renovation of the indigenous systems, but in terms of creating a “New Africa”.

force in Ghana, avoiding the divisions that affected for instance the Nigerian nationalist struggle, and avoiding threats to his own position which had been secured well in national elections. Secondly, to have a strong basis for a modernising development policy firmly steered from the presidential cock-pit at the national state level. Ironically, Nkrumah, as the great defender of Pan-Africanism in debates within Africa, was at the same time a staunch defender of the hegemony of the national state level in national debates.

My two examples have shown that what looks at first sight like a situation of import of foreign ideas at vital junctions in African history is actually a different thing. Ideas that play a vital role in relevant political movements in Africa are mostly selectively appropriated and tailored to fit their new role. Let me turn at this point in the paper to the philosophical analysis of such processes in order to rethink the whole idea of import of political ideas.

My philosophical criticism of the idea of imported political ideas concerns first of all the nature of political ideas. Political ideas are often considered as items that can be isolated, taken out of their context and travel without changing them. Importing political ideas is then considered as similar to adopting different types of food in ones menu. However, it can be questioned if it works like that with political ideas. I will argue here that politically relevant ideas cannot be taken out of their context without changing their meaning. Such ideas need a reference to concerns, strategies, and options for action of real, historically situated actors. Such reference provides, so to say, the air they breathe. Thus, political notions are charged with meaning by the context of action in which they function.

My philosophical criticism of the "import thesis", therefore, derives from a criticism of an objectivist theory of meaning and its replacement by a theory of meaning that relates meaning to context of action of real, historically situated actors. As argued convincingly by Wittgenstein, the meaning of words depends upon their use in a community of users. When notions travel and are included in a different linguistic and political practice (a different discourse), then one can expect these terms to change their meaning. Often, notions used in a different context simply lose much of their relevance. But when they start playing a key role in a new context, then this is generally because they have received new meaning in this context. Such life-histories of terms and ideas can be traced and are particularly relevant for political ideas. The history of political thought is often the history of re-coining central notions.

Let me give an example of such a travelling notion that became relevant in a new context in a changed meaning. Edward Wilmot Blyden, who is sometimes termed the most important black intellectual in the nineteenth century, arrived in Liberia in 1853 as a convinced Christian Abolitionist and Pan-Negroist. His thought was marked by the 'color-line', the key racial divide in the Americas between White and Black. Pan-Negroism aimed at uniting Blacks into a major and effective global force. However, as a model of thought,

the color-line was much less relevant in West Africa at that time. Racial difference only occasionally became a hot issue, as was the case in the missionary world in the so-called Native Pastorate Controversy in Sierra Leone – where Blyden got immediately involved in the controversy. In fact, the hottest issue in Liberia at that time was a racial issue, but between blacks. This concerned the competition between the lighter skinned elite who claimed a leading role and the opposition. Blyden became a partisan of the darker skinned, ‘true’ Negroes (he insisted on using this term and on writing it with a capital N).

Thus, the idea of the color-line and, consequently, Blyden's Pan-Negroism, was not going to be of much relevance for African political thought. However, Blyden's thought gradually changed from Christian missionary abolitionism, which considered it the task of the civilised and Christianised blacks from America to ‘save’ and civilise their African brethren, to African cultural nationalism, which considered African culture superior to the West. With this change, the idea of the color-line received new meaning, this time in terms of a cultural dividing line between Africa and the West.⁹ According to Blyden, the African culture and the African personality (he was probably the first author to use this term) were to guard their authenticity against the onslaught of western culture. Only in this new meaning did Blyden's idea of basic divides in humanity attain political relevance in Africa.

Such a new relevance of his ideas also resulted from considerably changed political landscape. Towards the end of the nineteenth century colonial racism was at its top. Africans could for most of the century pursue careers in the colonial administration (at one time there even was a black governor in British West Africa) but were pushed out now. Just as the African traders were pushed out of the market. This discrimination led to growing resentment and a reaffirmation of African cultural and political heritages. In this situation Blyden's thought, for instance his appeal for the establishment of an African Christian church, had great appeal. The idea of the color-line, which originally came from abroad as a racial and political notion, received new life as a guideline for a cultural nationalist orientation.

If this example is taken as representative for processes of export and import of political ideas, then statements about imported political ideas that have guided African political discourses in the past one or two centuries are superficial. Rather than a process of import, we have a process of selective appropriation and re-coining of terms and ideas within struggles and discourses that have their own dynamic and orientation. Such a type of appropriation is a sign of an open-minded and pragmatic orientation, rather than of dependency. This is not to deny, of course, that there can be cases where there is wholesale, thoughtless import; the introduction of state-farms, of the proletarian vanguard party, or of a simple multi-party recipe for organising the political power struggle can be cases in point.

⁹ One of the consequences of this change in Blyden's thought is a changed assessment of racial solidarities. He did not consider American Africans, especially not “mulattoes”, as a good influence for Africa: Africa had everything in its own resources.

The damage done by these imports is untold. However, we have to distinguish here between the fact of appropriation of something from outside (which is as such neither good or bad) and the discourse and political process of which it becomes part. I would argue that it is the quality of critical reflection about political realities and the degree of democracy and embeddedness of the political process that counts, not the assumed origin of the concepts and notions.

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